

## **Look, look at the kites!**

Nat Shapiro is an American artist who, like many of his fellow citizens, writers or painters, including Henry Miller, Sam Francis, Joan Mitchell or the Canadian Riopelle, decided to settle for a time or definitively in Paris, which was then the cosmopolitan capital of culture and creativity. Shapiro arrived in 1961, later than the others and lived there for a quarter of a century, long enough to thoroughly absorb European culture, a major influence on his art.

Shapiro adhered to both cultures, as well as to the dual activity of artist and illustrator, which he pursued until his return to the United States in 1985. As an independent painter, liberated from the constraints of the commercial world, he was able to give free rein to his sensibility and imagination. From his expertise as a graphic artist, he retained solid areas of hues, the dynamics and clarity of composition, the interaction of color and the line and modulation of the chromatic palette.

Although he also painted on canvas, it is primarily in his works on paper that he excels and where he best manifests his talent. Water-based paint, acrylic or gouache, all of which he uses as a medium, gives his work its lightness and fluidity, but also nuances of colors as well as a very great subtlety of tone. It is therefore not at all surprising that he was inspired by Klee as well as by Kandinsky's Bauhaus period, influences that sometimes went as far as borrowing some of their thematic elements, although always retaining his own creative style and personality.

His paintings' themes, be they kites, the cosmos (Galaxy) or the forest were only pretexts; springboards to his inspiration which he then used to create infinite variations based on a serial model.

If the kite series is unquestionably one of the most successful, it is because he could use it to deploy his imagination, his poetic sense and his humor with an almost childlike lightness. We know that kite virtuosi let the wind carry it, while they master its flight through an imperceptible movement of the wrist enabling them to direct the kite by means of a string and perform all sorts of aerial acrobatics. This is undoubtedly a metaphor of Shapiro's art: letting himself be carried by his poetic inspiration while simultaneously controlling it, directing it through straight, curved or broken lines. It is always the line that draws the motif, arranges the composition and gives it its dynamics, with color acting as a complement. Furthermore, Shapiro's work, regardless of theme, is most often vertical as though drawn upwards in an ascending movement.

The artist also made kite-objects; virtual works that have the shape and appearance of kites but without the frame that enables them to fly. This reveals a curious and whimsical spirit and perhaps also sheds a light on Shapiro's stylistic eclecticism.

Although he sometimes created figurative drawings inspired by his trips to Italy, Greece or Morocco, Shapiro also painted canvas and paper works that demonstrate a rigorous geometric abstraction akin to op-art.

It is perhaps in his illustrations of the Bible that the artist reveals the most intimate facet of his personality using stripped-down scenes and stylized figures with angular features, curiously recalling Chagall's stage set drawings of the 1920s, intended for the Jewish Theater of Moscow. We can see the same blend of humor and tenderness when the artist expresses his Judaism, but in an aloof manner, combining empathy with irony.

Yves Kobry

Translation by Allan Wenger